

Ian Waites

Extramural: Public Art in Britain 1951 - 2016

On the morning of Monday 11 January 2016, and very soon after the news emerged that David Bowie had died, a public mural of him in Brixton, South London immediately became an impromptu shrine for those who wanted to commemorate the life and music of the iconic pop star. The mural is tucked away on a gable-end wall down a short, pedestrianised street off Brixton Hill Road, near where Bowie was born on Stansfield Road in 1947. As the day progressed, flowers and tributes began to pile up at the foot of the mural, which depicts an image of Bowie taken from the cover of his 1973 album, *Aladdin Sane*. The mural was painted by Australian street artist James Cochran, aka Jimmy C, in 2013, and it soon became the focus of fans' grief, as crowds of men and women, often made up with that iconic lightning strip across their face, gathered to pay their respects.

This is perhaps but one function of public art, where a mural might become a visual medium for the expression of mourning or, for instance, heightened local or communal feeling. Arguably, art is at its best when it is fully public: outside in a town square, or on a gable end of a terrace of housing, free from the confines of a white space, or even a state bedroom in a National Trust country pile. Brian Eno once said that art is 'everything you don't have to do'. Equally, public art is everything you don't have to notice, and you do not have to choose to see it. The people of Brixton would have walked past the Bowie mural every day, maybe glancing at it as they went, a small visual detail to brighten up the day. Some might not have taken any

notice of it at all. Even so, it would most probably be missed if it were painted over, or if the building itself was demolished.

Bowie was a 'baby boomer', born just two years after the end of the Second World War, and so he grew up during a postwar era when the notion of taking art to the public blossomed as part of a new spirit of social democracy, of progress, planning and renewal. It was this spirit which, as we shall see, also manifested itself in Lincoln in 1953, when the Cathedral commissioned Duncan Grant to decorate the Russell Chantry with a set of murals depicting St Blaise, the patron saint of wool workers – and which of course is now the inspiration for Lothar Götz's new set of murals created within a 1:1 scale reproduction of the chapel at The Collection, Lincoln.

Grant's commission followed the significant boost given to public mural-making in 1951 by the Festival of Britain, where around 100 murals were shown at the South Bank Exhibition site alone. This stimulated both critical and local government interest, and it encouraged many artists to turn their eye to the creation of public murals, and to the use of a wide range of materials: ceramics, fibreglass, wood and concrete, as well as paint. Between 1951 and 1980, at least one thousand murals were created across the country, the majority being civic commissions for new schools, civic buildings, new town squares and pedestrian subways. They were intended to help bring the public realm back to life as local authorities began to repair and rebuild blitzed towns and cities, and develop New Towns and new council housing estates. In turn, and in this brave new world of culture for all, artists

themselves made these murals with a view to fostering shared, public experiences of creativity, of beauty, and a sense of hope for the future.

Although the postwar period was to see society become increasingly secular in nature, the church nevertheless played an active and central role in this flowering of postwar public art. Town planning at this time often involved an adoption of the European Modernist concept of the 'stadtkrone', or 'city crown', where a New Town or new council estate would have a modern architectural set-piece that was intended to play a central role in the development of a newly created parish or neighbourhood. More often than not, this would be in the form of a new church, designed in the modern manner, and which would also include new decorative artworks. In Lincoln for instance, the most notable example is Sam Scorer and Hajnal Konyi's parish church of St. John the Baptist (1963), which is the central feature of the Ermine Estate. The church is justly noted for its impressive reinforced concrete hyperbolic paraboloid roof, but it is also has a magnificent East window by Keith New (who was also responsible for the stained glass windows at Coventry Cathedral) which, as one commentator at the time put it, was intended to 'illuminate the whole building ... filling the church with colour, light and mystery'.

The abstract composition of New's window was meant to present the Ermine estate community with the 'Revelation of God's plan for man's redemption'. Similar lessons also occur in what can be considered as the earliest examples of public mural art in this country, and which were also be found in local churches: medieval 'Doom' paintings. These murals depicted

Christ's Last Judgment, and they were used by the early medieval Church as a daily visual reminder to worshipers of their immortality and of the fate that would meet them if they sinned. Doom paintings are most commonly found on the wall of the Chancel arch, so that they would be constantly visible to the congregation as they faced the altar during services. Medieval lessons of the 'end time' aside, the situation of these murals also meant that the scene had to be composed around the arch itself, and typically with Christ in judgment at its apex.

So another defining characteristic of public mural art is that the picture needs to be harmoniously accommodated into the architectural elements of the allotted space. This is certainly the case with Duncan Grant's decorations for the Russell Chantry, where the wide, clear expanse of the chapel's East wall is dominated by the depiction of Christ as the Good Shepherd. A vignette of St Blaise, the patron saint of wool workers, appears in a roundel which sits neatly above the door to the Chantry in the North wall, while the West wall is covered with a scene of Lincoln, looking over the Brayford Pool and up to the Cathedral (a view favoured by many of the great early-nineteenth century British landscape painters, such as JMW Turner and Peter DeWint).

In 1953, Grant was an establishment artist: he had the patronage of Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother and he had already enjoyed his first major retrospective at the Tate Gallery earlier that year. The Russell Chantry murals are all typically painted in his brightly coloured, figurative Post-Impressionist style. By this time however, his style was already considered to be somewhat outdated. Most public art in the postwar period, sacred and secular, tended

towards a more contemporary, semi-abstract, expressionist manner, for instance Graham Sutherland's tapestry, 'Christ in Glory in the Tetramorph', designed between 1954 and 1957 for Basil Spence's Coventry Cathedral. Nevertheless, after Grant's murals were officially unveiled on Saturday June 7 1959, an article in the following Monday's edition of the Lincolnshire Echo seemed content with their 'satisfactorily decorative effect – a work of colour and charm'.

The article tells us that the murals were unveiled by the then Vice Chancellor of Nottingham University, Mr BL Hallward, who apparently enlivened the proceedings with typical postwar chirpiness by stating that 'fashions in art change only little less frequently than women's hats.' 'Nevertheless', he continued, in perhaps a more necessarily serious vein, with Grant's murals 'a creative work of art remained.' As the historian of postwar Britain, David Kynaston, has pointed out, local press coverage of even relatively minor new developments in this modern age generally tended to be positive, 'seldom questioning the need to embrace the tide of modernity'. The Echo certainly felt that it had to add a note of solemnity to the unveiling of the murals by calling the article 'Creative Art, Undying', but it also clearly reflected the general postwar mood of consensus when it stressed the 'need to commission mural paintings in public buildings to which the public have access.'

The creation of public art continued through the 1960s and into the 1970s, but that mood of consensus, and of widening social democracy, rapidly began to dissipate during the Thatcherite period of privatisation of the

1980s and early 1990s. The final flowering of public art in the postwar period came in the 1980s, with the creation for instance of a series of murals in Brixton following the riots there in 1981, and of others carried out in locations across London in 1983, as part of the Greater London Council's 'Peace Year'. Since then however, many of those murals have disappeared or have become damaged. Indeed, all postwar public art today is in jeopardy – so much so that in January 2016, Historic England started a campaign which asked the public to help record and save what it described as 'the forgotten riches of our national outdoor art collection.'

How successful this will be in a society where an interest in the public realm has given way to atomized, individualistic modes of living is debatable. Much of our postwar Modernist heritage in general is, in any case, increasingly under threat from the private redevelopment and demolition of former public buildings, council estates and open spaces, to the point where public space itself is becoming commodified and controlled privately. Thankfully however, a glimmer of that postwar 'art for all' spirit remains today. Much of Lothar Götz's work – his 2006 murals for the concourse of the Piccadilly tube station for example – is in the best tradition of public art in its intention to enrich our everyday lives and, essentially, in how it engages with public place and space.

Jimmy C's 2013 Brixton mural of David Bowie clearly fits in with that tradition too. The mural is also painted in a style that the artist describes as 'aerosol pointillism', which, in this present context, also provides a happy allusion to the style of some of the Post Impressionist painters so revered by

Duncan Grant and the Bloomsbury Group. Another defining characteristic of Post Impressionism was of course the exuberant use of bright colour. In these grey days of enforced post-public austerity, when it appears that art is actually being taken away from ordinary people, it is good that we at least have colour, and lots of it, in the public murals of Duncan Grant and Lothar Götz.